

Musical Work in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project

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**Brenda Barnes
CEO, Classical King FM
Seattle, Washington**

INTERVIEWEE: Brenda Barnes

INTERVIEWER: Constance Aguocha

SUBJECTS: Classical King FM, mental health, environmental safety, African American, composers, performers

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CONSTANCE 00:00:17

Hey y'all, this is Constance Aguocha interviewing Ms. Brenda Barnes, CEO of Classical King FM. It is currently 9:08am. It's May 27, 2021, and I'm recording from Seattle, Washington. This will be a remote (*laughs*) interview. Brenda, do you want to share where you're recording from?

BRENDA 00:00:37

I'm recording from Seattle, Washington at Seattle Center.

CONSTANCE 00:00:41

Awesome, and—if you would just like to share what it is that you do, and just a typical day for you.

BRENDA 00:00:50

Great. I'm the CEO of Classical King FM, which is the classical music station that serves the Puget Sound region: Seattle, Bellevue and beyond. It's a public radio station, meaning we're a nonprofit organization, and therefore, fundraising is a part of my responsibility, along with really overseeing all the operations for the station. So, even when it isn't a pandemic, I don't really have a typical day, necessarily, which is part of what I like about the job. But, you know, typically, my job is to oversee, really, all aspects of the operation. I report to a board of directors, so I work closely with them as well. And the buck stops with me.

CONSTANCE 00:01:47

That's so awesome to hear. How do you feel like those responsibilities have kind of morphed during COVID?

CONSTANCE 00:01:57

Great question. They definitely have morphed. I would say when the pandemic first started, it was—we had actually just moved into a new building two weeks before the stay at home order was issued. So we were (*laughs*), we were getting

used to being in a new space, and we had all new equipment, and a new automation system, *(pause)* and it was a really tough time to immediately have to go into a crisis, because we had just completed this huge project that had taken about a year. So, there were sort of three things swirling around in my brain right at the beginning. One was, How do I keep the staff safe? The other was making the decision that we needed to continue to operate in our space, and we needed to be in our building and not stay at home, working from home. Some radio stations did work from home, and shifted their announcers, even, and all of their staff members to working from home, or most of their staff members. We sent some staff members home to work for a while, but basically, the core programming team was here every day in the office. So, part of my job began to be reading everything I possibly could about COVID and Coronavirus, so that I could understand the ever changing landscape and try to change our internal protocols to keep everybody safe and healthy. So, the life and safety of the staff became a top concern, something that's not usually as big of a concern in our world. So, that felt like a huge amount of pressure, *(pause)* and a lot of responsibility. And also, scary in that we were dealing with something that nobody knew anything about, *(pause)* brand new, brand new illness, so *(pause)* so that was definitely probably the most challenging part. And then the other part was also keeping the staff calm. You know, saying we— there's a lot that we can't control, but there are things that we can control; and we can control how we operate to be extra safe. So again, as the guidance changed, and we began to—to know more about the virus and how it transmits, etc., we kept changing our protocols for how we work, to make certain that we could do our best job of keeping people safe. Also, just caution people constantly, on a weekly basis, to be careful. Not to take any risks in their personal life, because any risk they took, they were going to bring into the office. So, how do we operate— especially being in a new environment, and then, also, how do I keep people safe—was at the top. And then very quickly, it became how do we serve our listeners? Well, they are stuck at home, right? They can't go out. They're scared, many of them are living alone, without their usual social networks, in terms of being able to see people. So, how do we—what do we do on the air to try to serve our listeners well? And the first decision I made [a decision], that we were never going to say the words Coronavirus and COVID-19 on the air. [CONSTANCE: Interesting]

BRENDA 00:05:58

The reason I made that decision is because you could go to so many places to get non-stop, you know, talk about COVID and Coronavirus. There were very few places you could go to get a break; And as we were all coping with the stress of the pandemic, and also, really understanding that no one knew anything about this disease, and that—we we're getting information, but it wasn't necessarily solid information we could trust for a lot of reasons.

CONSTANCE 00:06:40

Going and having a place to just get away from it and not have to think about it was really important for mental health, *(brief pause)* 'cause mental health obviously has taken a huge toll for really everybody during the pandemic, more so for some groups than others, but —having that mental health break, and that respite was important. And that ended up being a really good decision, and we heard from many of our listeners; they would write and call to thank us for being that kind of safe space they could go and never *(laugh)* hear about COVID. So we were — it ended up being a good decision. It was kind of a hard decision and hard for some of our staff members to understand, because it felt like, "Well, this is what we're living, shouldn't we be talking about it?" So, helping them understand people have [an] infinite number of places they can go for information, we don't need to be one of them, we need to be that mental health break. So—that was an early decision that we made. Another decision that we made a little further along the line as this stay at home order went on longer, was that people had more time to be interactive with us. So we started a weekly all request day. Every Friday, we played requests, and we figured it would make Friday feel more like Friday *(laugh)* for people who did something special, since there really wasn't that much to distinguish one day from the other. [CONSTANCE: Yea]

BRENDA 00:08:09

And then, the other side of it is that listeners could hear their requests, and really feel like the station was their companion, and was there for them, too, during the pandemic. So, that was another example of something we did to change our programming to—to meet the needs of our listeners.

CONSTANCE 00:08:31

That's awesome. Yeah, because thinking about it, (*laughs*) when I think about when COVID was kind of like in full force, and it was very new. It didn't matter where you went, everything was kind of like COVID COVID COVID in your face. So, having that just little (*pause*)—it's refuge. For listeners, that's just—that's a very awesome service. And you mentioned that it was something that you really had to try and explain to, I guess the employees and workers at Classical King FM for that decision. How did that go over? Was it more of a positive experience?

BRENDA 00:09:14

You know, I think so, ultimately. What I was able to explain to them, is we know from research that's been done on the classical music audience over a lot of years, really, that one of the things—there are three major reasons that people tuned to a classical station. One is it's soothing and relaxing, but also intelligent. So, it's not elevator music, soothing, but it's the experience of listening to the music is soothing, and they've actually done studies that listening to classical music can calm people down and it can lower their blood pressure. So, there's a physiological thing that happens, that we don't fully understand why, but this particular kind of music does have a soothing and calming effect on people. Even if the music itself isn't very soothing. It's, some of it's frenetic, and energetic, (*laugh*) and bombastic, and loud. But still, the overall experience is one that it feels like, (*relieved sigh*) you're just—you're able to just breathe and take a minute, and it's soothing and relaxing. So, that's one reason that people listen. Another is that it helps them focus. It's the kind of music they can listen to and work, and feel like it helps them concentrate more. And then the third reason is just it reminds them of aesthetic beauty, you know, beautiful things that human beings are capable of creating. So in this case, because we know that people come to us for that kind of soothing experience, that it wasn't going to be very soothing to talk about COVID and Coronavirus all the time, because that immediately leads to stress, right? Every time you hear the words. So, explaining that to the staff, you know, helps them understand why, in this particular case, not mentioning it was more of a service than trying to communicate that yes, we're here living with you and COVID by mentioning it, when we all know everybody's living in COVID. [CONSTANCE: Right (*laugh*)]

BRENDA 00:11:25

None of us [*?inaudible?*] no, none of us get to escape it. It's not something that happens to one group of people and not the other. It's something that happens to every single person around the globe. So, we didn't need—everybody knew that, we didn't need to remind them of it. What we needed to be was that place that was still a break, and soothing, and relaxing for them. So that helped them understand it. And you know, as we went along, and we started to get really positive feedback from listeners, then that helped a lot too.

CONSTANCE 00:11:59

Yes, yes. So, with having everyone—stay in the office during this time, and really trying to make that stay at home order work—I guess the nature of radio is kind of remote (*laughs*), in a sense (*laughs*), but what was the main reasoning that went into having everyone work from the station still?

BRENDA 00:12:27

Well, some people did work from home in the beginning, we—anyone who could work from home did. But, our programming staff, the announcers, they need the studios, and the microphones, and all the equipment to do the broadcasting part. And again, some stations, kind of issued a computer and a microphone to announcers and had them do

the work from home. But if you do that, you're recording in advance, you're recording your shift in advance, you're not live. We felt that it was really important to be live in the moment with our listeners. And for them to have that feeling that there's somebody who's with me in this—terrible journey we're all going through. But, here's my friend Dave, or here's my friend Maggie, or here's my friend Brad. You know, the announcers that they know, that they listened to all the time. They're still there for them, and they're still—they still sound the same, as they always did. So, we felt like that was really important in terms of our service to our listeners. And what we did to make that safe, is we have multiple studios we can broadcast from, so—and again, we were in a brand new building. So, all the equipment was new, all the furniture was new. We had a brand new, state of the art HVAC system for air handling, to be sure we could bring in outside air and filter—do all that, plus we bought HEPA filters and we put those in all the studios additional filtering. So that a person—and then we put tape all over the equipment, so that we could sanitize the equipment, you know, easily, without destroying it after every shift. So, we had a sanitizing procedure and we had the extra HEPA filters, and we had people alternate studios. So, no one went immediately into a studio someone else had used. We also issued everyone their own microphone windscreen. So, you use yours and you brought yours in and you put it on; so that you weren't using the same windscreen somebody else was using. So, there were things that we could do that would — allow us to operate safely and for them to feel safe. After about—I don't know, six weeks of working that way, where part of the staff was in the office and part of the staff was at home, it became really clear to me that the staff members working at home full time were struggling.[CONSTANCE: Hmmm]

BRENDA 00:15:09

This is a group of people who they really like being together and they like being in the office. So, they were not enjoying working from home, it was actually starting to have mental health consequences for them. So, I started bringing everybody else back, and what we did is staggered shifts. So we didn't have, you know, everybody in the space at the same time. So, we staggered shifts and days. So, some people would come in three days a week, some people five days a week, depending on their job. Some people would come in and work kind of late afternoon into the evening. Some people would come in early in the morning. So—but everybody was around other people. Everyone got to be around other people and talk to other people and have that human interaction. So, doing it that way and we're still operating that way right now. That felt safe to everybody. But, it also eliminated the problems that I was seeing in productivity and just focus. And people kind of really struggling. It eliminated that because people did get to come in and be together. So, it was definitely a process. But, you know, at that point in time, when I realized that there were mental health consequences; mental health is just as important as physical health, right? You cannot ignore that. And, it was just — it was just necessary to bring people back. And by that time, we definitely—I mean, we didn't know everything at that point, because, partly, the government was lying to us. But, that's another story, right? [CONSTANCE: laugh]

BRENDA 00:16:59

But (*laugh*) we felt like we could do it in a way that was safe and I moved people out of their — out of the thoughts they worked in to stagger, to create more social distancing. So, we were able to do it enough that we felt like it was safe to bring people back. And so, all but two people have worked in the office most of the time. Two people have worked full time at home, because they had either autoimmune issues or someone close to them with autoimmune issues, and it was way safer for them to work from home. And they still work from home full time until we really feel like it's—it's safe. And also until we know more about the effectiveness of the vaccine for people with autoimmune deficiencies. So— it's a process; [CONSTANCE: Yes] We're kind of targeting the Fall for people to come back into the office, but that's flexible, because what we're doing now is working just fine. And overall, I want people to feel comfortable. You know, I want, I want them to feel comfortable coming back and being in a smaller space closer together. It's really important to work with people on that. And that, that will determine the timing.

CONSTANCE 00:18:25

Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, just having to work during COVID, like even now, it's still stressful, but like, especially in the beginning, when no one had any information. Definitely, like this, the mental health (*sigh*) toll that it had on everyone. How do you feel that it affected you personally having to, kind of like, not only be in charge of your own self, but having to run this gigantic organization? How do you feel like, personally, it's affected you?

BRENDA 00:19:00

You know, I think it's affected all leaders. And certainly me. It's been (*pause*) it's been exhausting for everybody. There's no doubt about it. And—and we know that people are and have been affected by it disproportionately, as well. I think anybody running an organization has felt a lot of stress, because of not only the responsibility for keeping the organization strong, but also having responsibility for the people who work for the organization. And I definitely felt that pressure. I was—my goal was, I don't want to have a COVID spread here. I want to do everything in my power to keep people safe. Obviously, I don't control (*laugh*) their lives and their decisions. But, doing everything I could to provide information. So I was reading, you know, probably four hours a day at the height, about COVID.

BRENDA 00:20:09

The University of Washington put out a daily briefing of all of the medical academic literature that was coming out. That briefing was my lifeline, because we knew we couldn't trust what was coming out of the White House at all, and that's been proven and as fact. So, I really looked to the medical literature. We also knew that the CDC was being politicized. So, I really looked to that medical literature, and—and the experts in the field to provide the information that I needed to keep my nice staff safe. So I joke that, I should get an honorary degree in epidemiology (*laugh*) at this point (*laughter*). I'm just joking, but, you know, I've read so much about it (*laugh*). That, you know, people, people at the station come to me with questions now. Because, they know I've read so much about it. And they said, "You know, I forward your emails to my family and friends, because you're like my authority on COVID". So that was part of it, too, is needing to become an authority on COVID,—in short order and know everything about it that could be known about it. So, that was stressful, too. That, that— was a big part of every day, that added many hours to the day, in addition to doing the job, but of course, it was important and worth it. So, I definitely feel exhausted right now. I feel just, it's like— it's just been a year. And I've looked at—in the field of public radio, there have been quite a few people who've retired in the course of the year, I think—and I completely get it. It's like, you're this close already, and it's just, it just feels like, this is so much to manage at a time when I know I'm this close to being ready to retire. So, they just pulled the trigger and retired. And, you know, [*?I have?*] —in the arts community here, there have been a couple of people already that have stepped down as being executive directors of organizations, because it has been a lot. It's been a lot of pressure and a lot of stress. And we've really been lucky in that we've been able to (*pause*) operate the whole time, just like we always do for the most [*?inaudible?*] from a listener's perspective. We're always virtual (*sigh, laugh*), people—people don't come to our building to use our service. For the performing arts organizations, they're dealing with extra pressure of—they can't even operate, and their ticket revenue stream, which is huge for them is gone. So, how do you even meet your expenses? How do you keep the organization from going bankrupt? And of course, the arts was really the last sector to receive any kind of relief funding that was significant. So for them, the challenge has been huge. And that's been another part of our work (*pause*) that I didn't mention earlier, which was to support the arts community. So I was meeting weekly, with the other arts leaders in the community, understanding what their challenges were, and trying to turn that into advocacy on the air. So we, for example, right at the beginning of the pandemic, we asked our listeners to donate the value of their unused tickets rather than ask for a refund.

BRENDA 00:23:56

Knowing that the organizations really, really needed to keep that revenue, if they could. We asked people to subscribe to new seasons in 2021, knowing that organizations probably weren't going to be able to do in person performances at all, during that time, but would create virtual seasons for people. But, we asked our listeners to still support and subscribe to

the organizations that are important to them. And, we also promoted all the virtual offerings that people were doing, and continue to advocate for the arts. So, that really bumped up our advocacy work. We also created some new programming, in partnership with some of the organizations. We worked with Seattle Children's Theatre to create a Saturday morning children's program that had a story, a classical music piece that was geared for children, and then they did curriculum materials that parents could use at home with the kids. So, doing things like that with our arts partners helped give them that visibility, too, and allowed them to keep kind of feeling like they were doing their mission through the pandemic. So, we did special programming with The Opera, with The Symphony, Seattle Children's Theater, Meany Center at the U Dub [University of Washington] campus, etc. So we were really working hard on advocating for the other arts organizations too. [CONSTANCE: That's amazing] But, we also—all of the arts leaders meeting together once a week, gave us an outlet to kind of (*pause*) share with other people who are going through the same thing or something similar. So, we could commiserate and talk, and feel like we had,—we could share and think and work together. So that was actually really, really helpful, and a real positive for all of us during the pandemic.

CONSTANCE 00:26:03

Do you feel like, with the advocacy that you've been doing during the pandemic, and these new kind of, I guess, meetings and just having to be more interconnected than you've had to be in the past, do you feel like these are things they're going to carry on even after the pandemic?

BRENDA 00:26:22

Definitely. Great question. Yes, definitely, we were able to forge relationships, stronger relationships through the pandemic—that definitely will help us and will carry us forward. And organizations now know that when they need something, they can call on us, and we'll do what we can to help. So, that's very important, and definitely, extremely helpful.

CONSTANCE 00:26:52

Good, good. 'Cause I'm—which is sad about those live performance venues. It's true, because it's just like, overnight, essentially, everything getting shut down, and everything, just kind of, I guess, going away, in a sense. And you had mentioned how, with the arts, the arts were kinda last to receive any type of relief or any type of, I guess, safety net, that would be expected. How did that go? I guess, in your sector, in particular, but also, like, on a broader sense, how do you think that's been for musicians?

BRENDA 00:27:33

You know, really, organizations and artists have been hard hit. And, artists have also really—artists and musicians have really struggled during the pandemic. A lot of them make their living by playing gigs, being gig workers—all of that was gone. So, it was, it was problematic for musicians and artists that are better gig workers or make their living by performing with various ensembles. That was difficult, as well as organizations themselves, being able to—not able to perform and having to do furloughs and layoffs and reduced staffing. And really,—it's this, what most of the organizations are saying, is that for them, it'll be about five years to recover, [CONSTANCE: Wow] because they've been so hard hit. For musicians and artists, I haven't heard the same prediction. Hopefully, things start to come back a little bit more for them. But it's really a problem, a lot of them probably may have to get jobs in other fields. So we lose—we lose them as full time musicians or full time artists, and that's, that's harmful to the sector as well. So, there is more funding, now, for organizations and musicians and artists, and that's good—the American Rescue Plan, the relief funding package, did include some funding for the arts, but it also included funding for cities and counties and states. And one of the things that the former administration refused to do is provide that funding. So, cities and counties and states, unlike the federal government, can't print money. So, the federal government can print money and solve problems, but the other localities can't. So, they were struggling with their own budget issues and lack of revenues. No tourists, no people on transit and

needing to stop on transit. So, lots of issues there. So fortunately, with the change in administration, and that rescue package, it gave money to cities, counties, and states, and some of that is being allocated to the arts, thankfully. And that's much more significant funding that had been available to arts organizations or artists previously.

CONSTANCE 00:30:26

Right. So, do you feel—I guess it's been at this point about four months? Since the change in administration? Do you feel like things have generally gotten more positive? I know we've—you've mentioned how, the relief—like with those new relief packages, and not being very helpful, what are some—I guess on top of that, some bigger changes you've seen in just these past couple months, in that shift in administration?

BRENDA 00:30:54

Number one, it was super helpful just to be able to feel like information about COVID and vaccines, and—that was coming from the government was going to be more accurate. That was hugely helpful. Having a president who knows that Coronavirus is airborne and decides to hide that information? Oh, my gosh, how ridiculous is that? [off-camera audio] So now we're going to get more accurate, reliable information. It's not going to be perfect. It never is, you know, when you're dealing with big agencies, and, you know, government decision making, but it's way more accurate than it was, and that's a huge help. Also, just, number two, a government that understands that following the protocols is important, that can model good behavior. That's also, I think, really important. Modeling masking, modeling social distancing, you know, modeling caring for other people, as opposed to saying, "Let's just keep everything open, and so what if some people die; the economy will be better off, right?" No. [CONSTANCE: Uh- no] And that's actually not—not true at all. Saving lives is actually better for the economy, that was proven in Spanish flu. So, and then the other part of it, is just a government that understands that at a time like this, when the economy is faltering because of this unusual situation we're in, you need, you need to make investment (*pause*), to take care of people, to take care of communities, so that the recovery from this can be, hopefully, a little bit more equitable. We all know it's not going to be equitable, but at least it can be more equitable. If cities and counties and states aren't strapped for—cash, and if people can get a little bit more in their unemployment check, and if there's, you know, more ability to provide services to the people most in need of them. People experiencing homelessness, for example, you know, we don't have enough shelter here for people. So, you know, being able to have a little bit more money to maybe [off camera audio] rectify that by, you know, hotel rooms, etc., other short term sources until we can get a better grip on it. Those kinds of things are really important and help people. So I think all those things are really important. And certainly a big shift from the previous administration and all very helpful in my view.

CONSTANCE 00:33:48

Absolutely, absolutely. And then—{inaudible?} So, I guess, including these shifts, we now have vaccines being rolled out. Have you and your staff been able to get access to vaccinations?

BRENDA 00:34:06

Yes. Basically, we didn't get any preferential access to it. So, we all were able to get vaccines when we were eligible. [CONSTANCE: OK] I have one person on staff who's still uncertain about vaccines, and kind of understandable, it's a person of color, who obviously hasn't had great experiences with the medical establishment. Completely rational and understandable. So I'm talking to that person just to try to make certain they understand the, the pros and cons. But my, my view is, I'm not going to make people get vaccinated. I don't feel like that's my decision to make. People need to be able to make that decision for themselves, and I'm not gonna force it. But, I am going to let that person know that I can't—I'm not going to be able to protect them as things open up. And since—with everyone else being vaccinated, I can't—I can't protect them anymore. So, that's another con that they have to factor in. So, the responsibility is going to be totally on them to protect themselves, whereas the responsibility really has been on me, with the staff, to try to keep everybody safe,

prior to the vaccines. But now that there is a vaccine, and there's an alternative—I've got to take that reality into consideration. But, I think most people on staff now are fully vaccinated or very close to it.

CONSTANCE 00:35:52

Given, I guess—because what you mentioned about them being a person of color, and the hesitancy with it, are there any other ways that you feel like, I guess, including that, but that kind of the intersectionality of people, like being a woman, being a person of color; How did those various intersections also affect the experiences with COVID?

BRENDA 00:36:19

They definitely do. There's no doubt. I mean, we, unfortunately, we've had a—we've gotten a very unvarnished view of the inequities in our society, and a lot of white people, like me, have had our eyes opened a lot bigger, and we feel kind of stupid, that we didn't really understand it, fully, and see it earlier. But, you know, I just say, "Well, I see it now, and I need to do something about it, right?" So, part of that—part of it is understanding. So part of it's understanding the context. It would be really easy to say to this person, "How dare you not get a vaccine?" or "You have to go get a vaccine." you know? But, I haven't had the experience of going to a doctor and have them completely dismiss me—not treat me like a human being, right? Not feel like I was getting the same medical care that somebody else got from the same doctor, in the same place. So, if I haven't experienced that, I can still understand it, intellectually. I can't—I can't know what that feels like, but I can understand that it exists, and I can understand how that might affect someone. I can use my empathy, right? To—to understand how that might be an issue. And that's why I'm not forcing it. Because, number one, if that person did go and get a vaccine, and had a terrible reaction, that would be my fault, right? Because I had really applied the pressure that caused that person to then be in a situation that wasn't good, and that was maybe harmful. So, I'm not a doctor, I don't—I don't have medical training. I can't—I can't make those decisions. So, what I say is, "Here's the information that I have about the effectiveness of the vaccines, about side effects of the vaccines. But, talk to a doc, if you have a doctor, you can trust, talk to that doctor, or talk to different people in your community, who have had the vaccine, and, get—collect information in whatever way is most effective for you, and, make a decision, you know, for yourself." So, I just feel like that's one where we—we're—we can't be—we can't follow the same white supremacist patterns, right? We've got to—we've got to understand that—that other people's experience is very, very different, and it's very rational for them to feel fear. And it's very rational for them not to want to do this, and to be skeptical. And I can't talk them into not being skeptical or fearful or nervous, because all of their experiences said that they should be. So, it's not my place to tell them what to feel or what to do. My place is just to give them information.

CONSTANCE 00:39:35

Absolutely, yeah, that's one—that's been one recurring theme that I've seen just in a lot of sectors, not just music, but in general during COVID. Right now, it's a lot of things that I feel like me as—as a black woman, stuff that I see all the time. But, a lot of things have kind of forced other people to look like, "Oh wow!", all this is going on. In some ways that might even be, I guess—usually kind of in a silent way, have gotten very pronounced and very prominent. Do you feel like these experiences that have happened during COVID are going to translate into some more continued change, and more, I guess—just some more—what's the word I'm looking for? But, a more (*pause*) updated way of things working?

BRENDA 00:40:33

Yeah, I hope. I mean, I hope so across the board. One thing I can say is that, yeah, I really, after the the protests—during and after the protests, I really took a good, long, hard look at the work that we do here. There's almost no—no more pure bastion of whiteness than, you know, classical music in the arts, right? [CONSTANCE: Laugh] Going back hundreds of years. So, I really thought about it, and we grappled with it together as a staff. It was another one of the things that we really had to grapple with, during COVID, also. Look—really taking a good, hard, unfiltered look at what we do, and saying, "This is not cool". [CONSTANCE: Laugh] "What the heck have we been thinking?" You know?— So, we

started—last year, we kind of take—took a big step forward, the week of Juneteenth. We played primarily music featuring *(pause)* African American performers and composers for most—of a week. And during that week, we—we all found ourselves—I mean, we've been in this business a long time, many of us. And we'd note— we've been studying music for a long time, we were all hearing pieces we had never heard before. They were actually in our library [CONSTANCE: Laugh]. We had them here. But, by and large, we weren't playing them. And we listened to them and we went, "Wow, these are actually really good pieces." And one of our announcers actually said, "I'm embarrassed that I don't know this music. Why don't I know this music?" And as we looked at it, it's just a classic case of systemic racism. Right? So, when do you, you know, when do you—most people become introduced to classical music? Either because their parents play it at home, or in school. For me, I grew up poor. So, my—my exposure was in school. But, a lot of—in a lot of schools, they don't have any music or art at all, or it's very, very limited. So, if you don't, if you're not introduced to it there, if there's not equity there, there's not going to be equity anywhere else in the system, right? Because that's where it starts. So, there's not equity when it comes to who gets to study an instrument, and take lessons, and who gets into the best music schools, and who gets into the symphony orchestras, and the opera companies, and then who becomes the arts administrators. So—so we decided that we were going to make a change. And that we—we adopted a new strategic framework that we had been working on, and the diversification prior to the protest was already the big thing. But, it became even more— more important and more clear that that's what we needed to do. So, we have a strategic framework that calls for us to diversify our programming. Our goal now is to play— women have also been very much suppressed in this world, so our goal is to play music by a composer of color or a woman every hour. So that's a big, big change from what we were doing. And we want to keep pushing that forward. You know, we want to keep pushing the envelope as much as we can. The other thing that we want to do is diversify our staff and our board. So we're starting a new program. I've just hired someone to lead it, to identify people of color, who know something about classical music and have an affinity for it to train them to become announcers, so that we have a diverse group of announcers on the staff eventually. And our board also is working towards diversification. So our goal is to diversify our whole organization: staff, board and programming, and to make major progress on that in the next few years.

CONSTANCE 00:45:08

That's such fantastic work. I'm so glad to hear that because it definitely—classical music tends to be incredibly, incredibly white—

BRENDA 00:45:19

And incredibly male—

CONSTANCE 00:45:20

(laughs) And incredibly male, yes. Like I—I'm a violinist, myself, and I am typically the only black woman anywhere I go. A lot of times the only black person, sometimes one of just a couple of women. So, hearing this work that's coming—that like came out of kind of like, not the greatest year, but like some great things, being able to come out of it, and just creating more equity is just—just fantastic to hear. I'm glad to hear about this—lasting changes being made. Do you feel like there are other positives that come out of this situation?

BRENDA 00:46:05

Yeah, the other thing I'll just mention to tag on the programming side, is we named Dr. Quinton Morris as our artist scholar in residence, and he's creating a new program called Unmute The Voices that will just feature the music of composers of color. And—and probably some performers of color as well. But, that program debuts on Juneteenth, and we're really excited about that. I think—I think they're, you know, they're always positives that come out of any difficult situation, you know? You learn maybe that you're more resilient than you thought you were. You learn that you're stronger and tougher. We've learned a lot about how to use technology. I don't think I'd ever heard of Zoom prior to the pandemic,

and now, you know, it's like, critical to my life. So— [CONSTANCE: laughs) So there's that. And I think we found ways to connect. You know, we've all found—used zoom and video conferencing and FaceTime, and we've found ways to connect, and ways to (*pause*) continue to gather in a way that was safe. So, I definitely think we've learned a lot. We've learned a lot about—arts organizations have learned a lot about doing virtual performances. This wasn't something that they really did, but now they do and they plan to carry that on, they plan to continue to do that. I think we all see, more clearly, the advantages of in person, and we all see the advantages that virtual brings as well, and that both have their place and their function. Unfortunately, there have also been a lot of tragic circumstances, a whole lot of people, many more than ever needed to die, died. And people lost loved ones. And people had, you know, people had to deal with very difficult things without being able to do the usual morning rituals. But, again, people figured that out. People did Zoom memorials, they did YouTube, you know, they streamed on Facebook Live. So, we learned to do the things that were important in new ways, but we kept those things that were important.

CONSTANCE 00:48:35

Yeah, that was—yeah, it's definitely been quite an adjustment, having everything virtual, and not being able to just, I guess—in the all the ways that like things have kind of become abnormal, and now we're kind of new normal, having to do everything, kind of without that human connection, and just over Zoom and over Skype. I also had not even heard of Zoom (*laughs*) before all this happened. Just having to adjust and adjust a lot. Do you think that there's— I mean, I guess working in radio things are, again, already pretty virtual, but do you think that there's some lasting ways that all these new virtual technologies will be part of Classical FM and radio in general?

BRENDA 00:49:28

Definitely, you know, we're already planning for being able to do in person and, you know, kind of hybrid meetings with our board. So, if board members want to join a meeting while they're in Hawaii they—they can do that. So, I think that, you know, we're planning for those kinds of hybrid meetings where we can have people coming in virtually, and people in person, and people can choose which way they want to participate. So, things like that, I think, for sure will be helpful. I think we've also learned a lot as a staff about—we've become more flexible, we've become better able to adjust our programming quickly, based on need. And that's a really useful, important skill that I think we'll be able to carry forward. And, I think we've also learned what works—what can work in terms of working from home and what doesn't work as well, what gets missed there. We've been lucky to work together and have the value of collaboration, and brainstorming, you know, and being able to do that in person as well as virtually. And both of them can work, but there's really, there's a freedom and a comfort that comes from doing it in person when you can more better read cues and see that someone's about to speak more easily than you can on a big Zoom screen. So I think— I think a lot of these things will carry forward. We're learning from it, and we'll—we'll continue to use the skills that we've gained during the pandemic.

CONSTANCE 00:51:18

Absolutely, absolutely. I'm very—I'm very excited to see how things move forward, and just how we're all able to— evolve from this, and grow from this, and be able to look back to this one day and just go like, "Oh, gosh, like remember, remember how that was going?" Are there any other thoughts you'd like to share? Anything, I guess, anything we didn't cover that you would just love to share during this interview?

BRENDA 00:51:53

I don't think so. But, I'd love to know how you're doing. How have you survived all this?

CONSTANCE 00:51:58

Oh, goodness (*laughs*). Well, this was my first year of my master's degree, actually. So, I am—I'm a native Texan, and I spent my whole life living in Houston, did my undergrad at Nacogdoches, and then was living in Dallas for a year, and

then moved here in July (*laughs*) of 2020, when everything was shut down, and I was an essential worker. I was working at Target and going to school—going to school, like everything's virtual. And it's been—it's definitely been a challenging year. It's not how I would envision my master's degree going. So, just hoping for some—some normalcy, hoping—just like maybe next year, I can just have one normal year, one in person year. I miss live performing, I miss having facilities, being around people, making those friendships, making those connections, being able to explore all these things. I'm doing better now, if you asked me a couple months ago, I'd be like, "Oh, everything's over" (*laughs*). Doing better now. I think we're all just trying to make it through.

BRENDA 00:53:24

Yeah, well, it's a lot. Especially moving, you know, to a place—not having a family and friend support. That's a lot. I've had a couple of staff members in that situation, too. They had just moved here—single people just moved here, right before the pandemic, and it was really hard on them. I had to keep really close watch on them, because it was just so hard to be in a new place, to be alone, with no friends and no real ability to make friends here. That's—that's just really hard. I think that make, that was—that was tougher than anybody else had it. So, it was brave of you to make the leap, [CONSTANCE: laugh] and you should feel very, very good for how resilient you've been and how you handled it.

CONSTANCE 00:54:15

Thank you so much, and thank you for just how you've handled having to be a CEO of an entire corporation, and all these people, and literally having like a bunch of lives in your hands at any given time. I know that's been emotionally tasking and I'm sure physically and mentally tasking as well. So, just this kudos to you, just an amazing job. I can't imagine (*laughs*) having—'cause I have myself to worry about, I have my two little cats to worry about. Still, the idea of having like, people among people to worry about at the same time. That's just fantastic.

BRENDA 00:54:57

Well, you're a leader. You could have done it too. For sure.

CONSTANCE 00:55:00

Thank you, thank you. And, I think,—if there's nothing else that we're going to share, I'm gonna go ahead and stop recording and I'll just have a couple questions for you afterwards.

BRENDA 00:55:12

No problem.